

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

September 1, 1954

### **California Counties**

If a Californian of the 1850s felt that it was too far from his mine or his ranch to the county seat, he knew a remedy. He went to his neighbors, talked the matter over, and presently a petition was on its way to the State Legislature asking that a new county be formed, with a new county seat 30 or 50 miles nearer the homes of the petitioners. There was also a good chance that the Legislature would do exactly what they asked, and that the Governor would sign the bill.

California's original 27 counties, created in 1850 by her first Legislature, were: San Diego, Los Angeles, Santa Barbara, San Luis Obispo, Monterey, Branciforte, San Francisco, Santa Clara, Contra Costa, Marin, Sonoma, Solano, Yola, Napa, Mendocino, Sacramento, El Dorado, Sutter, Yuba, Butte, Colusi, Shasta, Trinity, Calaveras, San Joaquin, Tuolumne, and Mariposa. Branciforte was promptly renamed Santa Cruz, and Yola was changed to Yolo. Colusi did not become Colusa until several years later.

Several of these counties, notably San Diego and Mariposa were very large. To a man from Rhode Island these immense divisions of land must have looked more like states than counties. As little towns and farming communities developed in the back country it was natural that new divisions would have to be made.

Mariposa has been called the greatest "mother of counties." From her original boundaries were cut Merced, Madera, Fresno, Kings, Tulare, Kern, much of Mono and Inyo, and parts of San Benito, Los Angeles and San Bernardino. From old San Diego County came Imperial and most of Riverside and San Bernardino.

Desire for a convenient local government was not the only reason for making new counties in California. Sometimes divisions resulted from feuds between communities. Sometimes there were natural geographical divisions not known to the markers of the original 27 counties. And often enough there were local politicians who liked the idea of a new county government which they themselves could control.

The making and remaking of counties went on for 57 years. Some were created then wholly lost in subdivision-ghost counties. Others were given a legal right to exist and yet never "came to life". The hopeful

county-makers of California even tried to carve counties out of land which was not in the state at all.

Once there was a Klamath County, spanning northern California from the Pacific to Mr. Shasta, embracing all of the Klamath River valley and many of Trinity River's head streams. That was in 1851. The very next year Klamath lost her Shasta and Scott Valleys to newly created Siskiyou County. Three years later Trinity County claimed the natural boundary of the Trinity watershed. In 1874 Klamath County ceased to exist. Her hills and towns and debts were inherited by Siskiyou and Humboldt Counties.

There was one California county which never existed except in men's minds and that was Pautah County. For seven years bass-voiced miners clamored for Pautah County. The State Legislature was agreeable, evening naming Carsonville as the county seat. But unfortunately the land of Pautah County was outside the state, and the hard-hearted Congress of the United States refused to cede it.

Buena Vista and Coso Counties should have existed but did not. Buena Vista, first projected as Kern, was created in 1855. A dozen years passed. Newspapers and official records mentioned "Buena Vista county" but the county did not meet certain legal conditions, and now instead of Buena Vista we have Kern County. Coso County, created in 1864, failed to organize. Two years later Coso was recreated as Inyo County. Mono County lost its county seat, Aurora, in 1864 when it was shown that Aurora lay not in California but in the new state of Nevada.